

LETTERS
TO
AN EDITOR

BY
Robert Louis Stevenson

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*J M Dent
With kindest regards*

Clement Photo

Dec 1. 14.

LETTERS

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AN EDITOR

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R. L. S. AND AN EDITOR.

A FOREWORD.

I never met Robert Louis Stevenson. In the year that I abandoned a seat in a Government Office for the editorial chair of the *Illustrated London News* he was cruising in the South Seas preliminary to settling at Vailima. A year later it was my good fortune to secure from him the manuscript of a story, "The Beach of Falesā," which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in July and August of 1892. In December 1891, Stevenson had written to his friend Henry James—"I have a story coming out: God knows when or how; it answers to the name of 'The Beach of Falesā,' and I think well of it." In January 1892 R.L.S. writes to E. L. Burlingame* :—

"M'Clure is publishing a short story of mine, some 50,000 words, I think, "The Beach of Falesā." When he's done with it I want you and Cassell to bring it out in a little volume; I shall send you a dedication for it. I believe it good: indeed, to be honest, very good—good gear that pleases the merchant."

I did not purchase "The Beach of Falesā" direct from Mr. Stevenson but from Mr. S. S. M'Clure, who had bought the English as well as the American rights. In connection with the story I had in all seven letters from Mr. Stevenson, but three of these have disappeared from my collection. I probably gave them away to enthusiastic admirers of R. L. S. The four that remain have scarcely sufficient matter in them, it may be said, to justify their publication were it not that they are an index to Stevenson's pleasant method of dealing even with entire strangers. One of them has an interest in that it mentions a story, projected but never written. The suggestion that the "Go-Between" might "be lisped at a mothers' meeting" has relation to the fact that he was hurt by my treatment of a line in his story, "The Beach of Falesā"—an episode which seems to be quite entertaining

* "The Letters of R. L. Stevenson," Vol. II., p. 247.

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enough to be worth putting on record. But first let me say how pleased Mr. Stevenson was with the illustrations, the work of Mr. Gordon Browne. This is reflected not only in one of the letters to me but still more markedly in the following letter which appears in the published Stevenson Correspondence:—

“To the Artist who did the illustrations to ‘Uma.’

Vailima, Samoa,

Autumn, 1892.

“Dear Sir,—I only know you under the initials ‘G.B.,’ but you have done some exceedingly spirited and satisfactory illustrations to my story, ‘The Beach of Falesā,’ and I wish to write and thank you expressly for the care and talent shown. Such numbers of people can do good black and whites! So few can illustrate a story, or apparently read it. You have shown that you can do both, and your creation of Wiltshire is a real illumination of the text. It was exactly so that Wiltshire dressed and looked, and you have the line of his nose to a nicety. His nose is an inspiration. Nor should I forget to thank you for Case, particularly in his last appearance. It is a singular fact—which seems to point still more directly to inspiration in your case—that your missionary actually resembles the flesh-and-blood person from whom Mr. Tarleton was drawn. The general effect of the islands is all that could be wished; indeed, I have but one criticism to make, that in the background of Case, taking the dollar from Mr. Tarleton’s head—head, not hand, as the fools have printed it—the natives have a little too much the look of Africans. But the great affair is that you have been to the pains to illustrate my story instead of making conscientious black and whites of people sitting talking. I doubt if you have left unrepresented a single pictorial incident. I am writing by this mail to the editor in the hopes that I may buy from him the originals, and I am, dear sir, your very much obliged

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.”

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His first intention had been to call the story "The High Woods of Ulufanua." Ulufanua he declared to be "a lovely Samoan word." Writing to Sir Sidney Colvin in 1891, he said:—

"I still think the fable too fantastic and far-fetched. But, on a re-reading, fell in love with my first chapter, and for good or evil I must finish it. It is really good, well fed with facts, true to the manners, and (for once in my works) rendered pleasing by the presence of a heroine who is pretty. Miss Uma is pretty—a fact. All my other women have been as ugly as sin, and, like Falconet's horse (I have just been reading the anecdote in Lockhart), *mortes* forbye."

And a little later he says to the same correspondent: "I never did a better piece of work, horrid, and pleasing, and extraordinarily *true*." In a letter to Sir Sidney Colvin, dated January 31st, 1892, while Stevenson was correcting his proof sheets, he says:—

"'The Beach of Falesā' I still think well of, but it seems it's immoral and there's a to-do, and financially it may prove a heavy disappointment. The plaintive request sent to me to make the young folks married properly before 'that night' I refused; you will see what would be left of the yarn had I consented. This is a poison bad world for the romancer, this Anglo-Saxon world; I usually get out of it by not having any women in it at all."

To this letter Sir Sidney Colvin gives the following footnote:—

"Editors and publishers (since those days we have been *déniaisés* with a vengeance) had actually been inclined to shy at the terms of the fraudulent marriage contract, which is the pivot of the whole story."

Sir Sidney is not quite correct in his assumption that things would be any different to-day. With regard to the marriage contract certainly no publisher would question it, but the editor of a family

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newspaper would be in just the same quandary now as then. Here is the contract of marriage of the trader as it was set forth in Mr. Stevenson's manuscript :—

“This is to certify that Uma, daughter of Fa'avao of Falesá, Island of —, is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire for one night only, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her to hell the next morning.”

Although it is true in a sense that the whole story hangs upon the bogus marriage certificate between a South Sea trader and a girl of the Island of Falesá, I felt it my duty, as the editor of a family newspaper, to omit it altogether, and a passage which ran as follows in the *Illustrated London News* told all the reader was there able to learn about the bogus wedding certificate :—

“My conscience smote me when we joined hands ; and when she got her certificate I was tempted to throw up the bargain and confess. What a document it was. It was Case that wrote it, signatures and all, in a leaf out of a ledger. A nice paper to put in a girl's hand and see her hide away like gold ! A man might easily feel cheap for less.”

I confess that the author bore it very well—this ruthless vandalism. He doubtless uttered many curses in letters to intimate friends still unpublished, but there it was. Some of the greatest things in literature cannot be published in journals for general family reading, and no editor who knows his business would worry himself about the feelings of an author, however great, when he had such a point for decision. With book publication the question is quite otherwise. There is scarcely a publisher in London who is in the habit of issuing fiction who would hesitate to-day to print the Stevenson story exactly as he wrote it. The firm of Cassell, however, who were Stevenson's publishers on this occasion thought otherwise. Over that firm the late Sir Wemyss Reid at this time presided and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

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was his literary adviser. My friend Mr. L. F. Austin, who was in the habit of visiting Cassell's offices in La Belle Sauvage Yard as a contributor to the now defunct paper called "The Speaker," which Sir Wemyss Reid edited, gave me a very humorous description of a number of bearded gentlemen solemnly engaged in solving the problem how they were to pacify an author some thousands of miles away who had told his agents and representatives that not one line of that certificate was to be omitted from the story in book form. For long the controversy went on and finally a modification was agreed upon which is to be found in the story as printed to-day. It runs as follows :—

"This is to certify that Uma, daughter of Fa'avao of Falesá, Island of —, is illegally married to Mr. John Wiltshire for one week, and Mr. John Wiltshire is at liberty to send her to hell when he pleases."

The modifications are screamingly funny. How the Puritans of La Belle Sauvage Yard found saving grace in substituting a week for a day and "when he pleases" for "the next morning," it is hard to understand. Stevenson, when he had had time to recover from his annoyance, must have been greatly amused.

CLEMENT K. SHORTER.

November 24th, 1914.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR.

Vailima,
Samoan Islands,
Oct. 7th, 1892.

Clement Shorter, Esq.

My dear Sir,

I had already written you as an anonymous editor by last mail—the copies of the “News” having beaten your letter by a good month. Yours is thus practically answered before it arrived. And I have only to thank you for your polite attention.

Yours very truly,
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR.

Clement Shorter, Esq.

Vailima,

Dec. 5th, 1892.

Dear Sir,

Yours of 14th October is to hand, but not yet Mr. Browne's illustrations, for which I beg to express in advance my sincere thanks to Messrs. Ingram Bros.

I formally acquit the *Illustrated London News* of the error complained of, but now I want the blood of the typewriter. You know that men who write difficult hands are irritable.

In the matter of the story you have neglected to tell me at what date you would require to receive the copy and what remuneration you propose. I fear this will probably make us rather late for 1893—but perhaps we could arrange something for '94.

I learn that my mail despatched from here Oct. 12th has been burned in crossing the Plains; and I see on looking at my register the words "Clement Shorter, answering his." What was your letter? And what was the nature of my answer? I have now no guess—but please credit me with a good intention. It is, of course, possible the thing may be a newspaper hoax. If it be its author can flatter himself with having made me abominably uncomfortable, as I have lost, among other things, the end of a novel.

Yours truly,
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR.

Jan. 2nd, 1893.

Clement Shorter, Esq.

Dear Sir,

I have to acknowledge the arrival of Mr. Gordon Browne's beautiful illustrations, a favour which I very much value, and desire you to communicate my gratitude to Messrs. Ingram Brothers. A story of mine of about the length of 30,000 words (my guesses are always rough) may possibly be ready, or partly ready, by next mail; it is called "The Go-Between," and might be lisp'd in a mothers' meeting. Suppose it should suit you as to length you might offer for it to my agent, Mr. Charles Baxter, W.S., 11, S. Charlotte Street, Edinburgh.

Yours very truly,

R. L. STEVENSON.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR.

Vailima, Samoa,

January 18th, 1893.

Clement Shorter, Esq.

Dear Mr. Shorter,

Herewith I send you a short paper on the recent events in Samoa, accompanied by five sketches. The article cannot be used without the sketches; and in case you have no use for them I would ask you to send them on to Mr. Colvin at the British Museum. The cheque for the artist had perhaps better be made payable to Mrs. Strong, and sent to my care here.

I fear you have been troubled by delays about the story. I can only say no man is a master of the influenza.

Yours very truly,

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

For my article you will, of course, account to Mr. Baxter.

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Vailima

Savva

July 18th 1893.

Clement Shorter Esq.

Dear R. L. Shorter,

Herewith I send you a short paper on the recent events in Savva, accompanied by five sketches. The article cannot be used without the sketches; and in case you have no use for them, I would ask you to send them on to Mr Colvin at the British Museum. The charge for the artist has perhaps better be made payable to Mrs String and sent to my care here.

I fear you have been troubled by delays about the story. I am very sorry my review is a matter of this importance.

Yours very truly

Robert Louis Stevenson.

For my article, you will of course account to Mrs Baxter.

A FACSIMILE OF ONE OF R. L. S.'S LETTERS.

Of this pamphlet containing four hitherto unpublished letters by R. L. S., this is one of twenty copies printed by Clement Shorter for private distribution.

